

Engaging teenagers in science will improve the health of future generations

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(Medical Xpress)—A science and educational-based approach to diet and lifestyle will help young people improve their own health and the health of their future children, Southampton research has shown.

LifeLab Southampton is an innovative intervention, part of the National Institute for [Health](#) Research Southampton Biomedical Research Centre in nutrition, which aims to improve young people's health through education and first-hand experience of scientific approaches at the forefront of [modern medicine](#).

Since it started in 2008 more than 1000 school students aged between five and 18 years old, have experienced the scheme.

A study, published in the journal *Health Education*, included a survey of 597 14-year olds across Southampton, which gauged their views and behaviour in relation to their own health. A group of teenagers who took part in LifeLab were compared with those of their peers, six months after the intervention.

Results showed that LifeLab, created a wider appreciation among students that their current lifestyle could affect not only their long-term health but also that of their future children. Additionally, students became significantly more interested in [studying science](#) beyond compulsory schooling, and in considering science and healthcare career options.

As a result of the promising start LifeLab has had, University Hospital Southampton NHS Foundation Trust (UHS) and the University of Southampton have committed to building a dedicated LifeLab facility at Southampton General Hospital.

Opening in September the new lab, funded by the University, the hospital Trust and the Garfield Weston Foundation, will boast a custom designed laboratory with state of the art equipment for measuring how muscles respond to exercise, measuring the influence of nutrition on the [chemical structure](#) of our DNA and ultrasound machines to visualise the inner workings of the body.

Mark Hanson, Director of the Institute of Developmental Sciences and of Human Development and Health at the University of Southampton, says: "There is urgent need to promote healthy lifestyles in young people in order to prevent chronic diseases in them and in their children. Education can change attitudes, alter health-related behaviours and increase health literacy in young people.

"LifeLab gives pupils an authentic setting in which to engage with ongoing scientific research and health messages. By enabling them to understand the science underlying how lifestyle choices at an early age can drastically affect their health and that of their future children, we empower them to make healthier lifestyle choices."

Professor Cliff Shearman, associate medical director for research and development at UHS, says: "LifeLab is a fantastic innovation which brings together education, science and medicine in a stimulating, engaging and dedicated learning environment for young people.

"By visualising core public health messages and giving young people access to clinicians and academics in a custom-made setting, we strongly believe we will better prepare [young people](#) to take ownership of their

health and reduce lifestyle-related medical complications in later life."

The LifeLab team has recently received funding from the BUPA Foundation to extend the project. Over the next two years, the team will conduct an evaluation of the scheme which will follow students from three local schools which have had LifeLab sessions compared to students from three other local schools. The study is being conducted in conjunction with a similar project taking place in Auckland, New Zealand, which has been running very successfully for several years.

Professor Hanson comments: "The LifeLab project has three distinct phases, all with an ultimate goal of improving health. First we want to change pupils' attitudes; this is being proven at the moment. Following that the project aims to change behaviours with the third phase being a change in health, for the better. With our colleagues in New Zealand we want to find out if the changes in attitude produced by LifeLab can be sustained over a longer period of time in terms of behaviour. It is a very exciting project with still a long way to go."

Provided by University of Southampton

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